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ABSTRACT

To address the findings of the Kirby Review (that early school leaving is motivated by a desire for work and lack of interest in school), a new qualification, the Victorian Certificate of Applied Learning (VCAL) was introduced on a trial basis in 2002. The Northern Metropolitan Institute of TAFE (NMIT) Youth Unit offers programs at three northern Melbourne campuses to provide youth access to post-compulsory education and training. Two of NMIT's Youth Unit programs Young Adult Migrant Education Course (YAMEC) and Alternative Year 10 program transferred easily to VCAL requirements. Student selection interviews assessed whether a Youth Unit program would meet student needs. Followup interviews to monitor personal responses and course reflections occurred at least once a term. New staff were recruited who had qualities and strategies to deal with difficult behaviors; a relaxed, understanding attitude to working with youth; and a variety of teaching experiences and skills and literacy and numeracy expertise. Each group had a core teacher. Classes operated with a maximum of 15 students. Students with personal and behavioral issues were referred to and then monitored by a counselor. Program content included modules from Certificates I and II in vocational education and training; literacy education; and personal development. The Work Placement Officer attached to YAMEC helped students find work. Looking to the future, Youth Unit VCAL programs continued in 2003; NMIT conducted themed VCALS to provide vocational pathways for students interested in the areas of hospitality, engineering or building and construction; and the trial demonstrated a need to engage youth in courses with a strong vocational focus. (YLB)

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Beyond 'Kirby': Spotlight on the Youth Unit at Northern Metropolitan Institute of TAFE (NMIT)

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Beyond 'Kirby': spotlight on the Youth Unit at Northern Metropolitan Institute of TAFE; NMIT

*By **Ann Haynes**, Youth Unit Team Leader, Preston campus of NMIT*

The NMIT Youth Unit is situated within the Faculty of Further Education, which has a history of actively identifying and meeting the needs of disadvantaged students. The Faculty offers programs over three campuses situated in the northern region of Melbourne. Youth Unit programs and services provide a gateway for young people to access post-compulsory education and training and lay solid foundations for the development of meaningful and accessible pathways. The unit also provides an advocacy mechanism for its students, by mapping and reporting on policy developments and their potential impact on students; and by investigating flexible, innovative and achievable transitions to TAFE programs and settings.

The Youth Unit has been established for three years and has developed expertise in program and curriculum design for early school leavers. It integrates some delivery with the Adult Literacy Basic Education (ALBE) program, which delivered programs to young people for more than 10 years. Staff are experienced in customising and delivering competency-based training. Our involvement with the 2002 VCAL Trial Project enabled us to refine and review our programs and helped us develop expertise in mapping curriculum to VCAL to ensure that all accreditation requirements are met.

The core of the Youth Unit also operates externally, forging links and partnerships within the region. These partnerships have the capacity to resource individual students and inform ongoing program development and delivery based on a holistic understanding of students' needs.

The Youth Unit at NMIT has well-developed links with the local community and works collaboratively with:

- Local Learning & Employment Networks
- Local Government Authorities
- Schools and training providers
- Group training companies and employers
- Job Network providers
- Community agencies
- Regional bodies and networks

The Youth Unit programs involved in the VCAL Trial in 2002 were the Young Adult Migrant Education Course (YAMEC) and a program that had evolved over the two previous years, the Alternative Year 10 program.

YAMEC

For more than 13 years NMIT has offered the YAMEC program to young people from non-English speaking backgrounds, predominantly young refugees and asylum-seekers with severely disrupted educational

The Victorian Certificate of Applied Learning (VCAL) was introduced as a new qualification in Victoria on a trial basis in 2002 and is being delivered statewide in 2003. This qualification, delivered across secondary colleges, TAFEs and community organisations, is part of the state government's commitment to addressing the findings of *The Ministerial Review of Post Compulsory Education and Training Pathways in Victoria* (Kirby Review, 2000). Peter Kirby's report cited young people's desire for work, and lack of interest in school, as being major motivations in their decisions to leave school before completion of a secondary school certificate. NMIT was one of the twenty-two trial sites (one of two TAFE trial sites) for VCAL in 2002 and has expanded its VCAL program in 2003. VCAL and other educational programs for young adults have unique requirements in terms of teacher and student support. This article details the ways in which the Youth Unit at NMIT has catered for and accommodated learners needs and not compromised the space and support teachers require to work effectively within their training programs. For more information on VCAL, visit the Victorian Qualifications Authority website:www.vqa.vic.gov.au

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If you would like to be part of the review team please phone **Robyn Hodge** or **Corinne Ridley** at **Language Australia** **(03) 9811 2600**.

backgrounds in their country of origin. The YAMEC learning program offers case-management /case co-ordination to assist students to negotiate their way through the maze of structures and institutions of a new society. YAMEC students gain the necessary knowledge of pathway options to implement a supported career plan, and develop the skills and confidence to progress to further education and employment in Australia. The YAMEC learning program is offered at different certificate levels in order to engage and offer pathways to English language learners ranging from the pre-literate (ASLPR 0 level) to those who are undertaking training at a level which directly articulates into mainstream TAFE/VET courses; usually at Certificate II level. Many YAMEC students have successfully followed this pathway and are now in mainstream education/training, apprenticeship and traineeships, or employment. The YAMEC program transferred easily to the requirements of VCAL offering a meaningful learning program, which expands the pathways and further education and training options for students. YAMEC staff were keen for their students to be involved in the VCAL Trial last year. The VCAL qualification offers an accredited school completion certificate, which is valued by both newly arrived refugee young people and elders in their community.

THE ALTERNATIVE YEAR 10 PROGRAM

This program developed from the increasing awareness that many students were seeking an alternative to secondary school. ALBE classes that had once been the domain of adults were attracting youth who wanted to continue their schooling. In 2000 the Alternative Year 10 program was established. It was set up to provide pathways for young people into further study and/or employment so it transferred easily to the requirements of the VCAL.

Characteristics of students in this program are:

- early school leavers
- disengaged from learning and school
- low literacy/numeracy skills
- low self esteem
- disrupted family life/disrupted schooling
- low socio-economic status and few job prospects
- homeless students
- students with mental health issues
- students who found the school environment unpleasant and intimidating

Some students had left school not wanting to do 'VCE-style' study. They tried to find work and realised the scope of jobs available without a school completion certificate was limited.

Many programs were already in place at NMIT to assist students with social, emotional and other non-educational needs. Teachers and staff within the Youth Unit continue to adapt curriculum and implement support mechanisms.

PROGRAM DELIVERY

Student Selection/Assessment

A staff member from the Youth Unit conducts all interviews and assessments. Interviews are designed to elicit any student issues requiring support, to identify student interests and future aspirations in order to:

- assess whether we have a program to meet their needs,
- inform future program development

A detailed literacy and numeracy assessment also takes place at this time.

Once a student is offered of a place, s/he is invited to an enrolment interview with their class teacher. This provides an opportunity to discuss the program in more depth with the young person, and to clarify expectations regarding behaviour, attendance, progress and participation in the course. For each student who has been assessed and interviewed, a Student Information File is established and kept in the YU administration. Files are marked appropriately to indicate Job Pathways Program (JPP) and Managed Individual Pathways (MIP's) eligibility. JPP supports students in the transition from school to the Youth Unit. MIP's officers provides support to many students in the VCAL program. MIPs is an excellent resource for many of our students with support needs.

Follow-up Interviews

Follow-up student interviews to monitor personal responses and reflections on the course occur at least once a term. Teachers interview students individually at intervals, i.e. 3-4 weeks into the program, and at the end of the term, other staff assist with this process. Interviews help establish closer links with the students, monitor their progress and provide students with an opportunity to offer a personal responses and reflect on the program in terms of their needs.

VCAL TEACHING STAFF

The employment of suitable teaching staff to work in the Youth Unit has been essential to the successful operation of the programs. The YAMEC teachers in VCAL programs at Preston and Collingwood have worked with young adult migrants for a number of years, whereas staffing the General VCAL programs at Preston and Epping required recruitment of new staff. Teachers must want to work with youth, have the qualities and strategies to deal with difficult behaviours and a relaxed and understanding attitude to working with youth. Prospective staff are required to have a variety of teaching experiences and skills as well as literacy and numeracy expertise, to integrate a range of subjects into the general course eg art, drama. It took until the beginning of Semester 2, 2002 to have the VCAL trial program at Preston and Epping staffed as required.

Core teachers work with each group for at least 10 hours a week. The benefit of having a core teacher for each group is immense. Last year, students commented in follow-up interviews that having a teacher who they could relate to and develop a relationship with was important to their feeling comfortable and acknowledged within the program. All staff contribute to the welcoming and friendly atmosphere which provides a positive learning environment for students where individual needs are respected. Use of sessional staff is kept to a minimum, in the VET areas and in other areas when the search for contract staff has been exhausted.

During Term 3, 2002 a Youth Unit development officer took on the role of teacher support for the Epping and Preston General programs. As new staff had been employed at the beginning of the

semester, this role was seen as important in assisting with curriculum development and implementation, operational knowledge and general support in classroom management to ensure the success of the program.

CLASS STRUCTURE

Each group has a core teacher who works with the students for at least 10 hours a week. Students develop strong relationships with their respective core teachers. As a small number of teachers work within each program, students gradually become familiar with all staff. The management team makes it part of its job to have constant contact with the students. The core teacher is seen as a person to build a relationship with rather than as a disciplinarian. Classes operate with a maximum of 15 students. This allows students to get to know each other and the teacher. The teacher also has time to attend to individual needs. Youth classes are timetabled as often as possible in the same room. The 'home room' concept works well, contributing to the students' sense of belonging.

Teachers are allocated welfare time as part of their duties. This assists student follow-ups and provides some time to deal with individual student issues. As student levels in maths vary considerably, some students attend adult numeracy and maths classes timetabled at the same time as the Youth Unit classes. This enables students to attend classes that cater for their individual levels.

MONITORING STUDENT BEHAVIOUR AND ATTENDANCE

A Youth Unit Development Officer (Counsellor) role was created as many students have personal and behavioural issues that need to be addressed. If a teacher feels that an issue is better dealt with by the Counsellor, then the student is referred to her. This enables a teacher to take a step back from a perceived role as disciplinarian. If a serious misdemeanor occurs, a process is put in place that the student follows and is monitored by the Counsellor.

ORIENTATION TO THE YOUTH UNIT PROGRAMS

In all programs and classroom environments, the teachers' professional judgment is in operation. Their judgement is supported by the operating guidelines of the Youth Unit.

The first two to three weeks of the program is a transition time for young people coming in. Many of the students are familiar with the rules and requirements of a secondary school, and do not have a clear understanding of the learning environment of a TAFE institute. Students need time to develop an understanding of the rights and the responsibilities that come with their transition to an 'adult learning environment'. This is an opportune time for the class teacher to establish the learning environment of the classroom and the expectations of a student within the program.

NMIT reviewed its Student Discipline Policy in 2002. At the start of each semester, teachers are expected to organise class-times, negotiate class rights and responsibilities; and ensure that students are aware of Institute rules and regulations; (particularly the Institute Rule: Student Discipline), and ensure that students are able to successfully operate within these frameworks. The Youth Unit has implemented a code of conduct and developed a contract for students to sign before commencing classes. Consequences are clearly noted and followed. A code of respect was also developed and placed in classrooms and around the building as a reminder that it is a shared learning environment with certain expected behaviours. If, after being supported and guided by the processes outlined above, a student does not appear to be settling into/ benefiting from the program, s/he is referred to the Youth Unit Development Officer for counselling

ATTENDANCE

Students are encouraged and expected to attend regularly and on time. Poor attendance negatively impacts on a student's learning and causes disruption to a teacher's planned program. Regular attendance is a requirement for other student contracts - i.e. Centrelink Youth Allowance eligibility, Juvenile Justice guidelines. In 2002 some students found regular attendance hard to maintain early in the program, by the end of the year many students were attending even when classes were not on. If a student is frequently absent, the class teacher tries to make phone contact to ascertain the cause, provide support and encourage a return to class. Sessional teachers alert the core teacher if a student is frequently absent.

Continued poor attendance is raised at a Program Level meeting and appropriate follow-up procedures particular to that student's needs are put in place. If a student arrives late, this is noted on the Class Attendance Roll. The student is allowed to enter the class and join the activity quietly. If a student is consistently late, the teacher and student discuss this to determine causes redefine expectations regarding attendance. If there are outside issues impacting (homelessness etc) then the student is referred to the Youth Unit development officer for support and follow up.

Students and teachers negotiate scheduled break times within a timetabled class. Where possible, the VCAL General program classes have their breaks scheduled at the same time so that students have a chance to socialise. As classes are 2-3 hours long, shorter more frequent breaks are scheduled to help students get used to longer learning sessions.

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PROGRAM CONTENT

The CGEA and the ESL Frameworks are used in the YAMEC programs and the CGEA is used in the General VCAL programs. Modules from Certificate I & II in VET are used, along with 'Tasters' developed by some of the other departments within NMIT. Departments at other campuses offer programs but in 2002 most of our students wouldn't travel. Students are enrolled in Foundation VCAL as most of our students have come with low literacy levels. Matching accessible VET modules to student interests is difficult to do. Most students have little idea of career pathways.

Teaching units are developed through the Personal Development Strand of VCAL to address immediate needs and issues - social, emotional and health are a priority.

Much preparation is needed to prepare students to take up work placements. In 2002, work placements took place in Semester 2 and many students obtained ongoing part-time and casual work.

The Work Placement Officer attached to YAMEC assists students in finding work. Key partnerships enable students to participate in a range of employment and work-related experiences, from structured work experience, work shadowing and observation opportunities, to ongoing part-time and casual work, which become part of their learning programs.

Last year many students indicated (at interview) that they disliked maths, and in general we found their maths skills to be lower than literacy skills. We decided to enrol the majority of students in Certificate I CGEA Numeracy and Maths in 2003. This will enable many of the students to achieve Certificate I in Semester 1. In 2002 students enrolled in Certificate II often did not achieve their certificate at the end of the year. The aim for 2003 is to give these students a sense of success as well as review their basic maths knowledge.

In the later part of 2002 we started to use online learning, but this year we will explore its use further with the VCAL General groups. Most of the students are competent computer users and there are programs available relevant to our students needs. Online learning will provide us with an alternative and preferred mode of delivery for many of our students.

For staff, a weekly meeting format allows for discussion of both student welfare and discipline issues, and for curriculum planning and development, and assessment. On occasion and by negotiation, a meeting may have professional development activities allocated to it.

The first 30 - 45 minutes of a meeting is allocated to student welfare and discipline issues. A MIPs officer and a JPP representative attend meetings if required. The Youth Unit Development Officer and Co-ordinator also attend. Issues that come up during the week are discussed and procedures put in place if required. Weekly meetings are invaluable, as they are a forum for teachers to air views and concerns, and a place to give and receive support to and from colleagues. They enable other staff to keep in touch with what is happening and how staff are feeling. The frequency is important as student follow-up is prompt and all staff are in touch with daily events. Staff are informed of student achievements and progress and students are pleased when comments on positive progress noted at meetings is relayed to them.

YOUTH UNIT MANAGEMENT TEAM

This team is made up of the Youth Unit Coordinator and the two Youth Unit Development Officers. The Development Officers' roles vary according to the needs of the programs and the Unit. Their roles include:

- student counselling
- teacher support
- community liaison with various youth agencies
- LLENS contact and participation
- involvement in other youth projects within the faculty
- VCAL implementation and support
- members of Youth Unit Advisory group
- networking within the Institute
- building contacts with outside agencies and employers

The Management Team meets weekly to review issues, policies, planning and the particular projects of each member. The team concept works well and strongly supports staff, teachers and students.

PARTNERSHIPS

The Youth Unit has an excellent relationship with the Local Learning Employment Networks (LLENs) through the links developed by many of our staff. The Inner Northern LLEN (INLLEN) has set up a VCAL Network that provides a forum for VCAL Coordinators to meet, exchange ideas and support each other. The network is a forum for schools embarking on the VCAL to gain knowledge and assistance with their VCAL implementation.

The Youth Unit has strong links with the Darebin Youth Consortium and the Whittlesea Youth Commitment, as well as strong positive relationship with the schools in our INLLEN cluster of VCAL providers.

LOOKING TO THE FUTURE

The Youth Units VCAL programs are continuing in 2003. In addition, NMIT is conducting 'Themed VCALs' at Intermediate level to provide clear vocational pathways for students who are interested in exploring their options in the industry areas of Hospitality, Engineering or Building & Construction.

Our experience of the VCAL trial project has shown us that there is a need to engage young students in courses with a strong vocational focus. Themed VCALs are providing programs that are highly structured and designed to suit specific student interests, providing hands on and practical learning and work related experiences, as well as literacy, numeracy and personal development. Students and their parents have expressed a need for an alternative education experience for those who are exiting the compulsory school sector with incomplete qualifications. Some of the current students in the Youth Unit, NMIT, have indicated strong interest in these industry areas. Experience has also shown us that an integrated approach to the VCAL program raises the quality of the VET experience for students and thus, helps prepare them for life.

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